

Shining with ADHD by The Childhood Collective

Episode #187: Keeping Your Cool: How to Stay Calm When Your Child is Dysregulated

Mallory: Even when they're angry or escalated, they're watching us, they are observing us and how we're reacting. And if we are yelling, if we're visually stressed and very upset, this is kind of confirming to our kids that, yeah, the world is a little out of control right now, like, you're not safe, we're not safe. But when we stay steady and we are the calm that our child needs, we're communicating to our kids like, your big emotions are not something that I can't handle. You're safe, we are safe. And it helps them get back to that calm state.

Katie: Hi there. We are The Childhood Collective, and we have helped thousands of overwhelmed parents find joy and confidence in raising their child with ADHD. I'm Katie, a speech language pathologist.

Lori: And I'm Lori.

Mallory: And I'm Mallory. And we're both child psychologists.

Lori: As busy mamas ourselves, we are on a mission to support ADHD parents on this beautiful and chaotic parenting journey.

Mallory: If you are looking for honest ADHD parenting stories, a dose of empathy with a side of humor and practical tools, you are in the right place.

Katie: Let's help your family shine with ADHD. Hello, friends. How's it going today?

Lori: Pretty good. I mean, it's been, it was kind of like a slow weekend for us. My daughter has been like, sick continuously with different illnesses. So, in some ways it's, we'll be disappointed that like, lots of things get canceled, you know, but then in other ways, I'm like, gosh, it's so nice to just like, be at home and get stuff and have the time to like, get stuff done, like, and catch up on like laundry and dishes and work and stuff like that. But it does make the weekends kind of boring. But yeah, I feel, I feel a little bit better like entering this week because I like got caught up in some stuff that needed to get done.

Katie: Yeah, no, I totally agree. I'm the person that schedules the plans and then thinks it sounds amazing to do all these plans and then we actually get there and I'm like, oh my gosh, who put all of this on the calendar? So, yeah, I also can relate when it gets canceled, you're like a little sigh of relief. So, yeah, so today we are going to be talking about big feelings, which is something that we've kind of talked about a lot, but we're actually going to be talking more about big feelings for adults and parents. So obviously we know that parenting ADHD comes with lots of feelings and I know we've all been in those moments where we can just feel our kids getting dysregulated and it can really start to wear on us as the parents.

Lori: Yeah. And I will be honest. I am really feeling this lately. Like, I need this episode for, for myself because I've an almost 11-year-old so you, Katie, girl and, the big feelings are like, really hitting us hard right now. Just lots of emotions and attitude and my little girl, who was just always so cuddly and loving and she still is, is just becoming much more like, standoffish. Like, even when I drop her off at school in the morning, like, my youngest is like, bye, mom, like waving. And then my other one, like, doesn't even turn back to like say goodbye. This was my kid in kindergarten that like, could not separate from me. She was like, so upset. And now it's just like that teenager kind of attitude is like coming out. And then I do not respond well to that, to be honest. So, yeah, I need this episode just as much as everyone else does.

Mallory: Yeah, I think that probably almost every parent can relate to having some kind of big feelings in their homes at, you know, one point in time. And something that I've noticed is that when my kids are having all the big feelings, my reaction is probably the thing that makes the biggest impact on the whole situation.

Katie: Yeah, I totally see that in my own life too. And speaking of my almost 11-year-old, the other day she and I were sitting outside at my son's lacrosse game and the cross practice, or I guess it was a practice. Practices are in the evenings and it is very cold right now. Okay, I know that some of you that are listening are going to be really irritated by that because I'm talking about like 45 degrees, but 45 in Arizona, it has been very cold.

Lori: Katie. It has been under 32 degrees in the morning here. I mean, like, I have hat gloves on to walk the dog. It's cold.

Katie: And you got to kind of put this in perspective that we're the kind of people that when it hits like 65, we all pull out our boots and our puffy vests and, you know, that's our big moment to shine. So, we're talking like 40 degrees is dead of winter over here, okay. We are unprepared and our blood is very thin. I don't know if that's scientific, please do not quote me, but I'm fairly certain that Arizonans are not equipped to handle cold. So anyway, we're sitting out at the game. I am very cold, my toes are basically numb and I'm irritated about it, but my daughter is just letting me have it. She's like, it's freezing cold. I'm uncomfortable. I don't have my iPad. And it was just the amount of just like irritation that she was kind of bringing to the table was just overwhelming to me. So, I start to get real impatient. Like, normally I think I am a pretty empathetic person, but I was frozen from the inside out and I was just like, no, that's enough. And then what kind of went on to happen is she got louder and louder and I'm kind of looking around at all these other parents and they're kind of glancing over, and I started to get really embarrassed. And it was just this ridiculous kind of adding on of like, she's mad and then I'm mad, and then we're both kind of snarky with each other, and it, it did not go well.

Lori: Yeah. And I think you described just, like, what most families experience, this, like, difficult cycle of our kids get dysregulated, we get dysregulated. It's even worse what it happens in public because you're feeling, like, embarrassed, you're feeling shame, you're getting super annoyed and a lot of times it escalates. They're feeling embarrassed, they're feeling ashamed, right. Like, you're all feeling all the big emotions. So, it can be even worse when there are other people around, for sure.

Katie: Yeah. So I was definitely in the moment, just really not practicing what I preach. But so much of what we do teach here on this podcast and through all of our different social media channels is about supporting our kids, right. And setting up the environment so that these types of situations don't happen as often. We're focusing on building their skills and helping support them. We do actually have an episode where we dive deep into that, where we answer all your questions about helping kids build their emotion regulation and that is episode 175, if you want to check that out. But we know that big emotions are a huge part of that ADHD experience and today we're going to focus more on our own emotions and keeping our own calm and giving you some strategies.

Mallory: Yeah. So, we've all been there a time where we didn't keep our calm, didn't react in the way we'd like to, so something that we really want all of you to hear is that you're not alone and that it's okay if you don't always handle these moments perfectly. And today we're gonna talk through five strategies to help you stay calm or at least calmer, we hope, when your child is kind of in one of those emotional spirals.

Katie: Yes. Which is something that apparently, we all need. And before we jump right into that, if you are listening and you're enjoying the podcast, we are just going to ask you to please consider leaving us a five-star review. We do read every one of your reviews and they truly mean the world to us on those hard days, it keeps us going. But also, in the world of podcasting, reviews are truly the best way for us to reach more ADHD parents. So, if you just want to take a few minutes, leave a positive review. If you're on social media and you want to share this episode, it truly helps us so much to grow and to reach more parents. So, let's dive in.

Lori: Okay, so, our first, strategy to talk about today is that we don't want you to be taking your child's big emotions personally. Again, so much easier said than done and I struggle with this daily, okay. So, lots of reasons why kids with ADHD struggle to regulate their emotions and honestly, kids in general, we've talked about they're still developing their executive functioning skills. These are not fully developed; their brains are still developing. So, because of those challenges in, executive functioning, they struggle to regulate their emotions. Many times, we kind of assume that our kids have ways to cope with those strong emotions that, that they feel within their bodies and they really haven't been taught, you know, any ways to cope with that. Again, our kids can be really emotionally impulsive where they're going from 0 to 100 immediately. You know, one moment they're calm, the next moment something triggers them and they are off the charts, having a huge, huge meltdown. To our kids, every problem seems like a really, really big problem and insurmountable and unfixable. A lot of times, you know, we kind of see the problem and we can look at it through a lens of this seems really small and not a big deal. But again, to our kids, in their brains, it's a huge issue, right. And sometimes, that disconnect of what our expectations are for, like how you should react to something, results in a lot of conflict between us. Your child's meltdown really isn't about you and they might say things in those moments to make you feel like it's about you. I hate you, or you're the worst parent or whatever. But try to, I know it's really hard because those things are personally directed at you, but try to step outside of that and

realize they are experiencing big emotions and they're saying things, and a lot of times we say things we don't mean when we're emotional. We've all done it. I think you can think of if you have a partner or a spouse or you've been in any type of relationship, you've thought or said something that you really didn't mean about them because you were just emotional. That is what is happening here.

Mallory: Yeah. And I think that another scenario that we hear from parents often is they'll say, well, my kid seems to want to argue with me. Like, my kid wants to get into this back-and-forth argument with me. Like, they want to do this. And this is not just your imagination. We actually, we know that ADHD brains are really seeking dopamine. They kind of crave this stimulation. So, kind of this back-and-forth between you and your child. Again, it's not, I want to make it clear, it's not because your child wants to be mean. It's not because they want to be naughty. It's not because they're, you know, devious. But their brain really lights up with this kind of back-and-forth argument. And so, it's really important in those moments to realize, again, as Lori is saying, it's not about you, don't take it personally. It's how their brain is developing and working.

Katie: Yeah, I mean, growing up, it was always funny in my family because my parents would always say, you know, there was three of us, and it would be like, okay, at least one of you has to grow up to be a lawyer. Because we just loved to argue. We love to argue our point. We love to win. I mean, we didn't even hate losing, we just liked the act of kind of arguing. And so, I think that's a huge piece. But, you know, as your child does escalate, it's so important and I think our number one thing we can focus on is not getting sucked into that argument with them. You know, one strategy, of course I love to talk, but I have to remind myself that the more words I use during an argument, the harder it's going to be for my child to calm down. So, we use words we're trying to regulate, we're trying to repair, but in that heat of the moment, that words can actually be counterproductive and make it take longer for your child to calm down. And so, for this tip, we just want to offer you a quick mindset shift. and this is to think of your child's dysregulation as a storm they are weathering. It's not a personal attack on you, and it sounds really corny, but your calm is kind of the umbrella that they need.

Our second strategy is to take a pause. Okay. I honestly don't know if the first strategy or the second strategy is hardest for me. These are the two that I work on the most. But what we

want to encourage you to do is to just take a few deep breaths. You might need to step into a different room for a minute, assuming that everyone is safe. You can use a mantra and, you know, and you can talk yourself through it. Like, this is really hard, but I can handle it. I love to think about some possible scripts you can use because I do think this is hard to picture, I think for a lot of us in our mind, like, how would I get out of the fight with my child? So, something that I might say is, I need a minute. I'm really angry and I need to calm down. So, I'm going to go in my room, I will come out and talk to you in five minutes. And this is a great strategy because I'm being really clear that it's about me and my calm. But I'm also setting up a little bit of a contract with my child like, hey, I will come back out and we can talk more. Now, I do not do that if they're still shouting at me, so that's the caveat there. Another one that I will use because again, my house is really loud and I will say, you guys, this noise is just completely overwhelming me. I need to put in my headphones and I'm gonna go listen to my favorite song and when that song is over, if you are calm, we can talk it out. And so, you're just being really clear to let your child know, hey, I'm gonna go take a minute and you're not saying it in an angry, screaming way. You're not like, you're the worst kid ever and then slam the door, even though you might honestly want to do that. But you're going to model just a very calm way of explaining it, but you're setting a clear boundary and then you're going to do that thing. And yeah, I would say don't come back to your child if they're still shouting and dysregulated. You know, give them a few more minutes to calm themselves down. Is there anything you guys would add to that as child psychologists?

Lori: As you were talking, I mean, again, we know from the research how effective learning from watching, we learn from watching others do, right? And it can feel like a very simple thing to take a pause for yourself and go listen to your favorite song. You are modeling for them how to cope with a big emotion. Like, you are showing them this is a coping strategy to use when I have a big emotion. And sometimes, you know, we hear that from parents all the time is like, my kids won't use a coping strategy. Yes, that is true. Like many kids are, they're so escalated in that moment, using a coping strategy is just not possible. They're at a 9 or a 10, they're just not going to be able to. But we do want them to get to a point eventually of, pausing when they're starting to escalate and use a strategy. And they're going to learn best from watching you do it.

Mallory: Absolutely. Another coping thought that I like to use in these kinds of situations when I'm taking a pause is that this won't last forever. I actually use that coping thought in a

lot of different aspects of life. Like when I'm feeling anxious or something stressful is happening. This won't last forever. This always ends. This has happened before. There was an end to it. This won't last forever.

Lori: Yeah. And a quick mindset shift for all of us as parents is we're people too, and we need to meet our own needs a lot of times first in order to be able to support our kids. And sometimes it can feel like we have to do all of these things for our kids all the time. We need to help them. I see so many parents when their kids are extremely emotional and melting down and they're talking to them and pouring into them and, you know, trying to help them regulate and kind of ignoring the fact that they're dysregulated. And I know they're dysregulated because I'm dysregulated watching these kids get escalated like, and they're not my own kids, right. But it is so hard to stay calm in those moments and a lot of times all that talking and validating and talking about emotions isn't even helpful for our kids, It can even make it worse in the moment. So, I think a lot of times modeling for them, hey, I need a break and I need to calm down is really helpful and you can be a better support to your child when you kind of recognize and help yourself first.

Mallory: Yeah. And I think this leads nicely into our third strategy about how to keep your own calm and that's be the calm that your child needs. So, as we've kind of mentioned, like, even when they're angry or escalated, they're watching us, they are observing us and how we're reacting. And if we are yelling, if we're visually stressed and very upset, this is kind of confirming to our kids that, yeah, the world is a little out of control right now, like, you're not safe, we're not safe. But when we stay steady, and we are the calm that our child needs, we're communicating to our kids like, your big emotions are not something that I can't handle. You're safe. We are safe. And it helps them get back to that calm state.

Lori: Yep. And so, practically speaking, what does that look like from us? It looks like using a calm, steady tone of voice. And again, if you are dysregulated too, which, again, I have kids in my office all the time that are like throwing things and hitting and very aggressive and it is very like, you know, your emotions get escalated. I get it, like, I feel it too. And I have to tell myself, take deep breaths and try and speak as calmly to them as possible. Even though my voice wants to like, be high or, you know, it doesn't feel natural, right. Speaking slowly and just saying fewer words again is just really important. Even thinking about your nonverbals is

so important and our kids pick up on those things. So, making sure your face is neutral, that you're not looking angry or looking mad.

Katie: Yeah, I love that. And I think, you know, depending on the situation, this can also be a really good time to slip in a little bit of empathy for your child and just noticing what parts are challenging for them. So, for example, every time I tell my 8-year-old, hey, we're gonna put this laundry away, I will, okay, it's not fair to say every time, but most times he will tell me it's going to take forever, it's going to take ages. What works the best for me is staying really calm and really neutral and saying, I know you're upset, but we need to put this away before we can go outside. And then the empathy piece is acknowledging how he feels. I know it's frustrating, but this is just what we need to do. And slipping in a little bit of empathy shows them, hey, I'm listening to you, I hear you. We're still going to do it. And I think that's a common misconception if you show empathy or compassion that you're giving in. And that's not the case, you're still holding that line and saying, this is what we need to do right now. This laundry isn't going to put itself in those drawers. But I can say, I get it, that's hard. And I don't really want to put away my own laundry either. But the laundry is on your bed and you're going to want to go to bed tonight, so let's do this thing. And you know, the empathy and the humor, like very light amounts of empathy and humor in the moment can be really helpful for some kids.

Mallory: So, your quick mindset shift here is you can tell yourself, I don't have to match my child's emotion level. This is something I am in control of. Especially when a lot of things feel out of control.

Katie: Yes. I was gonna say it's maybe the only thing that I am in control of, but in fact I am in control of it, so I love that.

Lori: So, our fourth strategy is to start to notice your own triggers. So again, we all have certain things, and certain behaviors in our kids or maybe even certain things that they say that just really push our buttons and it's going to be different for every person. So maybe for you it's back talking, for maybe for another person it's the sibling fights, where they're just constantly arguing and bickering over something. Or maybe for another person it's when they make huge messes. They've spilled a drink for the third time that day and it is just overwhelming.

Katie: In the back of your car after you told them to put it in a different water bottle.

Lori: It's funny, that literally just happened to my husband this morning. He is so funny about his car and does not want spills in it. And yeah, my daughter hit like spilled for the third time in his car and he was cleaning it out.

Katie: Oh man. Yeah. I think just being aware of those triggers does make a huge difference because one, you can have a little empathy for yourself, okay. If you're a person that wants the backseat of your car to not have smoothie on it, that's okay, that's reasonable. And you have to have a little empathy for yourself. And at the same time, when you're aware of it, it helps you to notice, hey, I need to do something to get through this. Noticing what's hard for you gives you, just like we do for our kids, gives you the opportunity to be empathetic and then be curious. What do I need in this moment?

Mallory: Absolutely. And then when you're more aware of those triggers and you can notice those triggers for yourself, you're better able to kind of make a plan to help yourself move through those tough moments. So maybe if you know one of those moments is happening, the kids are fighting again, there's a friend that you always text who knows exactly what to say. Or so many of you have told us that a strategy that you use when you're overwhelmed or dysregulated is to drink something cold through a straw. Maybe you turn on your favorite song like Katie does. Put in your AirPods, turn on your favorite song. Maybe you get outside a little bit of sunshine, some deep breaths. What else do you girls, what are some other strategies?

Lori: My husband and I were in marriage therapy, and one of the things that we were working on was just like, kind of communicating at what percent our batteries were, like, at a certain point in the day. Sometimes we'll communicate, like, I will just say I'm at 25% and I can't handle it and he needs to, like, take care of the situation. Sometimes he'll say, like, I'm just, I'm out of spoons. There's nothing left. I have nothing left to give at the end of this day. And it's just kind of like a communication to each other of like, I need you to step in here. Where it fails sometimes is when we're both, like, at a 0% and somebody has to step in and take care of it.

Katie: That's when you say, I'm at negative 15%, so it's your night to go upstairs.

Lori: You just one up them. That's what you, that's how you handle that. That's what my therapist told me.

Katie: Okay, so is this the official recommendation? Are we on the record here?

Lori: I mean, most of the time, one of us, we're not both having a horrible day. Although it would say, like, in the last month our work has been a little bit stressful at times for both of us. But, usually one of us has a little bit more battery or a little bit more to give at certain times of the day. Or sometimes it's a situation where I know it's like, more of a trigger for him than it is for me. Like noise, for instance. So, like the sibling fighting when there's like, lots of noise involved, he is, like, way overstimulated and those are times when I need to step in. And sometimes he's better in other situations than I am. So, again, I think communicating with your partner, if you have a partner, I know not everyone does, but sometimes that can be helpful too, to kind of say, I'm just, I'm overwhelmed right now and I need you to step in and handle this.

Katie: Yeah, I think for me, it just depends on the situation. You know, I know that I'm very sensitive to my environment, and I didn't know that about myself until just the last few years. But truly as a parent, being aware of what triggers my kids has made me more aware of what bothers me. And so, I noticed that if I'm cooking dinner and the kitchen is really chaotic, and there's just. Our kitchen is in the center of the house, like most people, and they, the kids will come, you know, dancing through and, you know, open the fridge and hit each other accidentally in with the elbow and it's just a lot. And so I, if I can, I will clear off kitchen counters faster than should be humanly possible. You know, I will get the stuff in the dishwasher, I will light a candle. I think it just depends on the situation. But again, just recognizing for yourself the exact same way we do for our kids, like, okay, this is what's going to help them feel better and this is something that can help me feel better. So, our quick mindset shift for this action item is that by recognizing what triggers me or annoys me the most, I can make a plan to support myself. And this is such an important part, but we are deserving of that kind of support just as much as our kids. And I think that's a really important thing for parents to recognize for sure.

Mallory: So, our fifth and final strategy is that when things go off the rails, so to speak, you can repair with your child. So maybe you yelled, you slammed a door, you said something you wish you didn't say. These things happen to every single parent. But you can and you

should apologize to your child, explain why you lost your cool, and model how you take responsibility for your actions.

Lori: Yeah, I think this is one skill I feel like I am good at as a parent, and it's not something that I was good at early on in life. And marriage really taught me to work on this skill, you know, because it is such a critical part of relationships. And I think because I got better at in my marriage, it's been easier to do with my kids. One of the questions we get asked so often is, you know, how do I get my child to take responsibility or apologize, like, when they've made a mistake? Because so many times kids won't do that. And I always, you know, try and tell people the best way to do that is to model it and to continue modeling it. And I know for many, many years, like, I would do this repeatedly with my kids. I mean, it's practically every day I'm having to apologize to them about something. I, you know, I was just writing, you know, something in a journal to my daughter the other day, where I wrote to her and said, you know, I just apologize for kind of getting short with you because I want her to know, like, you know, a lot of times it's not her. Many times, it isn't her. It's my reaction to something she has done, and I don't want her to kind of live with that shame or whatever about what has gone on. And I know after, you know, doing this for many years, my kids are starting to now do that independently, without me prompting them, without me asking them to do that, because it's been something we've modeled so regularly and so frequently to them. But again, the best way to teach your child to do that is to show them how to do it yourself and to go to them and say, hey, I made a mistake. I really messed up. This wasn't you; this was me. And parents, a lot of times have big emotions, too. We all make mistakes.

Katie: Absolutely. Yeah. And so, a quick mindset shift here is no parent is perfect. And so, the most important thing is that I do repair with my child when I lose my cool.

Mallory: So, today's key takeaway is that as parents, we do not need to be perfect. When we show up as our most regulated selves, we're supporting our kids and giving them tools they need to manage those big feelings. So, take a deep breath, grab that metaphorical umbrella, and just know that you've got this.

Katie: Thanks for listening to *Shining with ADHD* by your hosts, Lori, Katie, and Mallory of The Childhood Collective.

Mallory: If you enjoyed this episode, please leave us a review and hit subscribe so you can be the first to know when a new episode airs.

Lori: If you are looking for links and resources mentioned in this episode, you can always find those in the show notes. See you next time!